

## Independent filmmaker creates niche with Christian film company

By Lori Arnold

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — It was one of *those* conversations. The preacher's kid—raised in a Mennonite community where movies and dancing were as taboo as drinking, smoking and cursing—realized after a parent-request year at the prestigious Moody Bible College he was just too smitten with acting to take a final bow.

The decision was the easy part.

"Then I had to have *that* discussion, 'Dad, I want to leave Bible school and go to Hollywood,'" said David A.R. White.

Desiring a solid biblically-based academic background for their children, the Rev. Gene White, and his wife, Marcy, asked each of their three children to attend at least one year at Moody and David their three children to attend at least one year at Moody and David willingly honored the request. He admits his parents, active in church, were concerned about the oft-crass culture of Hollywood, but they supported his dream.

"I'd have to say if I had false teeth I would have dropped them," his pastor father said. "I don't think he saw two or three movies the entire time he was growing up. It was a total shock."

They decided they could either oppose his decision or try to guide him through it. They choose the latter.

Armed with their blessings the young White went to work. Securing support roles in several TV shows, including teenage Andrew Philpott on Evening Shade with Burt Reynolds. He had spot appearances on hits "Sisters," "Melrose Place" and "Coach." In between on-camera jobs, he worked in production.

Focusing exclusively on mainstream productions until the late '90s, White opted to go back to his roots for "Moment After," a 1999 film he produced.

"I thought I would do only one Christian film and I would be done and go back to mainstream, but God had a different plan," he said.

Eighteen months ago he and his founding partners, Michael Scott, Byron Jones, Russell Wolfe, Elizabeth Travis and her husband, singer Randy Travis established PureFlix, a Christian-based production company that also offers study materials to accompany their films.

"Our goal is to really hit more on the personal relationship with Jesus Christ, with the Bible studies and the teaching points in the movie," White said.

### **Special premier**

On April 30 their first film, "Hidden Secrets," which White wrote, will be released during a special one-night premier at more than 200 theaters across the country. White also stars in the movie.

White likened the film to the 1983 super hit "The Big Chill," which centered around an impromptu reunion when a group of old friends gather together for the funeral of one of their own. During the course of the story, each of the characters reveals their private struggles.

"(Big Chill) struck a chord with society at the time," White said. "But there was no redemption, no hope in that. My desire was to create a film that was the reverse of that. Over the course of the weekend their past becomes their present."

White said his film also reveals private prisons, but ultimately leads to forgiveness.

"We want to tackle some of those things we harbor and bring them before Chris," the film's writer said.

The subject matter includes tough issues of today, including abortion, pre-marital sex, stem-cell research and homosexuality.

"We tried to do something original and hit on the core issues that are impacting society today," he said.

### **The guinea pigs**

The exclusive theatrical release is part of an emerging trend among theater operators who have branched out to use rentals for independent projects and concerts. White said that the theater operators recently opened up their special projects to test the water

for Christian films.

"We're the guinea pig," he said.

The theaters are doing their part, he said, by showing the film's trailers on thousands of screens nationwide.

After the special one-night release, PureFlix will be posting downloadable copies of the film on its Web site so that pastors can use it and the Bible study lessons for their congregations.

"We want to use this movie as an outreach tool to follow up with the people," he said.

They plan to follow *Hidden Secrets* with a fall release, called "The Wager," which stars singer/actor Randy Travis. White met Travis while they worked on last year's "The Visitation." Travis and his wife were intrigued by the PureFlix concept, White said, so they became partners in the venture. While Travis spends in excess of 200 days a year on tour, Elizabeth has found a creative outlet of her own through the Christian film company.

"They have a heart for this and it was something they really wanted to do," he said.

### **Emerging market**

The initial offering from PureFlix is coming at a time when Hollywood interest in Christian films is escalating at an unprecedented pace.

"It's an interesting time now," White said. "Before, no one would look at the Christian market and now every mainstream studio wants to develop a Christian division. We can have a meeting in town with anyone we desire, pretty much."

Like many industry analysts, White attributes the shift to Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," which grossed \$370 million in the United States alone and is currently ranked the 11th highest grossing domestic film.

"You can't negate those numbers," he said

That international mega hit has been followed by other successful releases including "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," "The

Nativity" and "Facing the Giants."

"Seeing it explode has been pretty cool," he said. "We always figured it would be like Christian music, but we were 20 years behind."

Also helping to fuel the market is increased quality in the Christian offerings. Schmaltzy has given way to award-caliber films.

### **Clean and relevant**

White admits money is a driving force before the newfound Hollywood interest. According to Dr. Ted Baehr, founder of Movieguide, family friendly movies outperform all other movies by a significant margin.

"It's business, and it's what you do," White said.

"We're trying to make better movies," he said. "We're trying to make better scripts. You try to be excellent at your craft first and foremost."

In addition to clean and relevant scripts, White said having the independent production company helps them to maintain creative control.

"Our goal is to keep our message intact," he said. "We can control it. We don't have to give in."

While White is hoping for a strong showing at the one-night theatrical release, he said he believes Hidden Secrets will ultimately be measured by a different barometer.

"You want people to get out there and to see it, but obviously, success is, how does it touch people?" he said. "Does it change them? Does it impact their lives? Does it bring people to a higher understanding of who God is?"

For this film, White, who also tours with his one-man comedy act, hopes his message is clear.

"Christ forgives and there are second chances," he said. "There is hope at the end of the tunnel and God is waiting there. He's just waiting on us."

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